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From One Girl to 'Three Girls': the importance of separating agency from blame (and harm from wrongfulness) in narratives of childhood sexual abuse and exploitation

Abstract

In May 2012 nine men from Rochdale were convicted and jailed for grooming girls with alcohol, drugs and gifts before forcing them to have sex with multiple men. Following the case in Rochdale similar cases of grooming and sexual abuse / exploitation of young girls came to light in various towns and cities across the UK. In 2017 the BBC aired the drama Three Girls which featured the story of three of the victims whose abusers were ultimately jailed in May 2012, including one whose story of abuse was not listened to and whose abusers were ultimately not charged with abusing her (although they were charged with abusing other young girls). In this paper I draw parallels between the experiences of these three girls and another victim of childhood sexual abuse (interviewed as part of an ESRC funded research project) to show how the central features of this story (childhood sexual innocence and victims' lack of agency) are deeply problematic not only for victims and child protection services, but also for how teachers and other education professionals understand children and young people's sexuality and CSA (a term I use to include child sexual exploitation or CSE) and ultimately how they respond to victims.

Key words

Child sexual abuse (CSA), child sexual exploitation (CSE), Rochdale, choice, sexual innocence

Introduction

In May 2012 nine men from Rochdale were jailed for grooming girls with alcohol, drugs and gifts before forcing them to have sex with multiple men. This was not an isolated incident but it did receive considerable public and media attention. This was in part because the abuse had been reported to the police over a number of years, and indeed in 2008 one of the victims (known as Girl A) reported being sexually abused to the police. The Crown Prosecution Service did not believe her to be a credible witness and decided not to prosecute, but she was a key witness in the May 2012 trial that led to the nine convictions. The majority of those convicted in May 2012 were of Pakistani origin and much of the media coverage characterised the issue as 'gangs of Asian men preying on white girls', which in turn sparked concerns about 'racial tensions in the north-west and the input of far-right elements' (Carter 2012). It was suggested by former Labour MP for Keighley Ann Cryer among others that complaints to social workers and the police were ignored because they were "petrified of being called racist" (Cryer, cited by Bunyan 2012). However, I would suggest that one of the main reasons those who were in positions to protect those victims in Rochdale and other UK towns and cities failed to do so was because they adhered to a particular dominant narrative of sexual abuse / exploitation which prevented them seeing the experiences of these girls as sexual abuse. This is because, as I argue in this paper, this dominant narrative is based on particular understandings of the ideal child sexual abuse victim as both sexually innocent and lacking agency. To deviate from either is to risk being removed from the categories of child and victim.

In 2017 the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) screened the drama *Three Girls* which was based on the Rochdale case and featured the story of three of the victims whose abusers were ultimately jailed in May 2012. In this paper I will explore the implications of this dominant narrative for those (such as teachers and other education professionals) working with children and young people, including those young people who (they think might) have been sexually abused. In doing so I will draw comparisons between the *Three Girls* and an example from my own research with adult female victims of childhood sexual abuse or CSA (funded by the economic and social research council, ESRC). This paper draws on the large body of work on narratives and stories from within feminist and /or sociology (see for example Bauman 2001, Jackson 1998, Jamieson 1997, Lawler 2002, Plummer 1995, Tavris 1992), and from psychology and social work (O'Dell 2003, Reavey 2003, Smith Warner 2003). I will begin by looking at the importance of stories for making sense of our lives before tracing the history of our contemporary or dominant narrative of CSA, and its implications for individuals to tell their own stories. I will then show how the central features of this narrative (innocence and a lack of agency) are deeply problematic not only for victims but for how teachers and other education professionals understand CSA (a term I use to include child sexual exploitation or CSE) and respond to victims. Throughout this paper I refer to victims as female. This is in part in recognition that the majority, but not all, of victims are female, and in part because the paper discusses the stories of female victims.

The role of narratives

In his influential book *Telling Sexual Stories*, the Sociologist Ken Plummer argued

> ‘everywhere we go, we are charged with telling stories and making meaning – giving sense to ourselves and the world around us’ (Plummer 1995:20).

In telling our stories we do not simply slot ourselves into readymade narratives but we do draw on stories or narrative frameworks (and we might say – a cast of characters) that are currently in circulation and these are both culturally and historically specific. The stories that are dominant now were not the stories that were dominant thirty or forty years ago. We are therefore not free to tell any story but constrained by those stories currently in circulation (author 2009, 2014, 2017, Bauman 2001, Plummer 1995). When it comes to telling stories of childhood sexual abuse (CSA), one story has come to dominate (author 2014, 2016). This is the ‘harm story’ (O’Dell 2003) and, as I argue in this article, this limits the possibilities for telling of sexual abuse and leaves those whose experiences do not fit neatly into this narrative framework unable to tell their own story of being sexually abused – or at least to have that story heard and their voices listened to.

The history of our contemporary story of CSA

The story of child sexual abuse that has come to dominate is based on a number of assumptions: childhood is a time of sexual innocence; ‘genuine’ victims of sexual abuse are passive and unable to exercise agency; sexual abuse is overwhelmingly and inevitably harmful, which has in turn led to the view that CSA is wrong because it is harmful. However, this is not the only story that could be told of childhood sexual abuse. It is also not the only story that has, in the past, been told, but its dominance has made other stories harder to tell (author 2014, 2016).

The history of CSA and the aetiology of the harm story of CSA show the extent to which contemporary understandings of both the experience and consequences of CSA have changed over time. These changes are, in part, informed by our changing understandings of childhood and childhood innocence, together with a particular understanding of what it means to be a healthy and happy adult. In tracing the history of this narrative we can see that we have gone from concerns about moral purity and eugenics (Egan and Hawkes 2009), to believing CSA to have little real effect on its victims, to measuring its wrongfulness purely in terms of the damaging effect it is said to have on its victims (author 2014).

Towards the end of the 19th Century campaigners raised concerns over the sexual abuse and prostitution of young working class girls. This resulted in the raising of the age of consent from 13 to 16. Public debate resurfaced in the early 20th Century culminating in the 1908 Punishment of Incest Act. However, the focus of these debates was not so much on the psychological harm caused to victims but on issues of immorality, social purity and eugenic concerns around ‘in-breeding’ amongst overcrowded working class populations (Kitzinger 2004, Smart 1989). We can see evidence of this in the exclusion of step-daughters from the 1908 act. The concern addressed by this act was not about men having sex with young girls in the home but rather about men having sex with young girls they were biologically related to. Debates around CSA resurfaced again during the 1950s and 1960s but the consensus during this period and up until the 1970s within psychology and popular understanding was that child sexual abuse had few if any long-term negative effects (Kitzinger 1993, Jenkins 2004). The one exception to this was some concerns from within psychiatry around victims’

sexuality and whether they would be put off sex with men (Kitzinger 1993). In the feminist moment of the 1970s and 1980s a new story emerged in which CSA was constructed as a social problem in need of a social and political solution (Armstrong 1978, 1994, Kelly 1988, Rush, 1980, Ward 1984). This new story acknowledged the potential harmful effects of CSA, but also showed 'the other side of being a victim' (Kelly 1988). This story recognised that male violence was not just about male power but also women's and children's resistance (Kelly 1988, Kirkwood 1993, Maguire 1992) and allowed for the possibility that 'the process of coping with negative effects may, in the long term, have positive outcomes' (Kelly 1988:159). However, it was a narrative framework that remained in circulation for a relatively short period. Feminists and traditional therapists sought to diagnose the effects of sexual abuse, to warn victims and society and to provide treatment programmes to facilitate women's and children's recovery. It is this focus on the effects or harm caused by CSA that has come to dominate contemporary understandings.

Our contemporary story of CSA emerged in the late 1980s and 1990s and portrayed CSA as a 'profoundly deforming experience' (Contratto and Gutfreund 1996:1) whose victims were 'not well adapted to adult life' (Herman 1992:110). In this way the measure of the wrongfulness of sexual violence came to be judged solely in terms of the damage or harm it was seen to cause, rather than the wrongful act itself. This new story was a singular story of psychological damage, the 'harm story' (O'Dell 2003) or 'survivor discourse' (Worrell 2003) in which child sexual abuse was said to be so (inevitably) and overwhelmingly damaging that the effects would stay with victims into their adult lives.

More so than other forms of child abuse, the sexual abuse of children is said to disrupt, or alter, the 'normal', natural path of children's development into healthy responsible adulthood (Dinsmore 1991, Parks 1990). According to much of the sexual abuse recovery literature (including the texts drawn on here which have been reprinted and are still in use) sexual abuse is often referred to as an attack on childhood (Kitzinger 1997). Incest, it is said, 'robs children of their childhoods' (Dinsmore 1991:21) and victims are told 'they were damaged early. Something was broken at a core level' (Bass and Davis 1988:178). Women who were sexually abused in childhood may grow up to be 'guilt-ridden, self-sabotaging, sexually dysfunctioning, on-going victims' (Parks 1990:13) who are 'not well adapted to adult life' (Herman 1992:110). In the words of Bass and Davis**,** 'survivors were programmed to self destruct' (Bass and Davis 1988:179). All of these messages, I would suggest, are deeply problematic not only for adult victims but also for those young people being abused now. Not only do they suggest that those being sexually abused now will inevitably be overwhelmingly damaged but these messages also suggest that CSA is only wrong because of the damage it causes.

In this way sexually abused children and young people are also presented with a framework within which to make sense of their experiences and a 'culturally approved victim' (Lamb 1999:117), seen as not only sexually innocent, passive and lacking agency, but also white and middle class, against which they can be judged. This tells them of ruined childhoods and lost innocence and directs them to see themselves as helpless, passive and sexually innocent in order to avoid the risk of being held, or holding themselves, responsible for their abuse. Not only might this influence how child victims make sense of their experiences and whether they see particular experiences as abusive or not, but

it might also influence who - or even if - they tell of their experiences. This contemporary story, populated as it is by the 'culturally approved victim' (Lamb 1999:117), is also one that can be used by those, often in positions of authority or influence, to make judgements about young people's experiences, including whether experiences involving sex with older / more powerful men are sexual abuse – and therefore whether those young people need and/or deserve protection. An alternative and increasingly common term, which refers to the 'risky sexual behaviour' (Doubova et al 2016) of victims of abuse, also focuses on their behaviour to imply some responsibility. As Parkkila and Heikkinen (2018) rightly argue this also fails to recognise the active role played by those who are abused in a way that does not equate it with blame. We can see the implications of this dominant understanding in the lives of the three young women from Rochdale whose stories featured in the series *Three Girls* and in the story of Jay discussed below, none of whom conformed to the ideal or approved victim.

The research: methods and participants

I now want to draw on some of my own research with adult women to look at some of the implications of this dominant story. This research (which was funded by the ESRC) explored sixteen adult women's engagement with the CSA recovery literature and involved women who had, by their own definition, identified themselves as a victim of sexual abuse in childhood based on continuous, recovered and/or false memories of having been abused. However, the research was not concerned with establishing the 'truth' or 'falsity' of women's claims but took as its starting point that women's memories and the narratives they told were 'true' to them, whilst recognising that, like all of us, they are constrained by the stories that can be told (author 2009, 2014, 2017, Bauman 2001, Gergen 1994, Plummer 1995, 2001).

The research was conducted, in accordance with the ethical guidelines of the British Sociological Association, in the United Kingdom where all the participants were living at the time. The women were contacted through an article describing the research and calling for participants which appeared in the newsletter of two organisations: one supporting self-identified victims of CSA, and one supporting those who identified as victims of false memory syndrome (FMS refers to a belief that the memories of CSA that victims uncover are false, and possibly implanted by misguided therapists). The latter resulted in few responses and the organisation sent an additional letter to female members on my behalf. The women's experiences, whether of 'healing' and 'recovery' or recovering 'false memories', occurred in Britain but the women were not all British. Ten were white British, two were British Asian, two were white European, one was non-European of mixed heritage, and one identified as 'other'. The majority were in their thirties (seven) or forties (six) with one woman in her late fifties and two in their early sixties. Eleven identified themselves as heterosexual, two as heterosexual with some bisexuality, one as bisexual, one as a lesbian and one as 'gone off men'. When asked about their educational qualifications, four had O levels, one had A levels or equivalent, one had NVQs, one was a mature student, one had a professional qualification, and seven had a first degree or higher.

The aim of this research was to explore women's engagement with the CSA recovery literature in the process of making sense of their lives, (re)constructing their life stories, and planning for what they hoped would be a brighter future. The research was conducted within a feminist social constructionist

framework and (following a short questionnaire to establish some background information including, if known, women's age, sexuality, the time and place they believed the abuse took place, who had abused them, and what self-help and recovery literature they had engaged with) potential participants were offered the option of participating via an interview (11) or through providing a written account (5) based on the interview questions. The interviews lasted between two and six hours (of which one went over two sessions) with the majority conducted in participants' own homes but with one conducted at a University office. They were all conducted by the author, tape-recorded, and later transcribed. The written accounts were conducted at a time and place of the participants choosing and posted to the researcher. Once the interview transcripts and written accounts were collected they were subjected to thematic analysis. All the transcripts and written accounts were read multiple times to identify principle themes. A further re-reading and revision of the themes resulted in a number of the themes being subsumed into larger themes or categories. This reflexive process allowed me to develop themes by immersing myself in the data through reading and re-reading the material rather than by indexing the text with coding software. This produced three overarching categories or mega themes: 'Narratives' which included the sub themes 'making sense', 'symptoms', 'discourses and understandings of CSA'; 'Knowledge and the inner child' which included the sub themes 'the inner child', 'multiple and split personalities' and 'alternative memories'; 'Healing and the self' which included the sub themes 'identity', 'the self' and 'healing and moving on'.

In the remainder of this paper I draw on material relating to the first theme: the construction and use of narratives of CSA. However, I want to focus on the data from just one interview, with Jay (a pseudonym) from this research. Jay, was in her 40s at the time of interview, and identified as heterosexual, white British and married with three adult children. She had entered adulthood with continuous memories of CSA, which included physical and emotional abuse. Although she left school with no qualifications, she had since gained qualifications in community care. I draw comparisons between Jay's experiences and those of the three girls whose stories were dramatised in *Three Girls*, to show the problems inherent in our contemporary story of CSA. In particular I want to show how the narrative sub-plots of children as sexually innocent, children/victims as passive and lacking agency and victims as inevitably and overwhelmingly damaged informed the experiences of these four victims, how these four victims interpreted their experiences, and the stories they were (un)able to tell.

Childhood and sexual innocence

As I discussed above a central premise of our contemporary CSA narrative is the construction of healthy childhood as a time of innocence, particularly sexual innocence. This construction allows for the idea that sexual thoughts or activities, identified as inappropriate in children, must have come from outside the child as 'childhood sexuality is conceptualized as the result of an outside or deviant stimulus' (Egan and Hawkes 2009: 391). The sexually knowing child is therefore problematic. Not only does she challenge or disrupt the artificial boundaries between childhood and adulthood, but this knowledge both marks her as potentially damaged and constructs her as potentially corrupting both to other children and, like the fictional character Lolita, to adult men. It allows for the idea that the sexually knowledgeable or sexually active child, constructed as non-innocent and corrupted,

(Robinson 2012), is not or no longer deserving of the protective cloak of 'childhood' and therefore sex with such a child can be seen as not abusive. This can also be applied to children and young people whose sexual knowledge and activity is acquired through being abused. It is worth clarifying here that I am not suggesting it is not abusive, but this view of childhood means that some people can see it as such. I would suggest that many of the professionals who failed those young women in Rochdale whose stories were told in *Three Girls* did see it this way.

Jay: an old and a new story of CSA

The dangers of such an understanding can be seen in the story told by Jay, who in adulthood came to identify herself as a victim of sexual abuse in her childhood. Jay had continuous memories of having sex with adult men throughout her childhood but she did not see herself as a victim of CSA until much later. Jay was a victim of years of abuse throughout her childhood, much of it sexual, perpetrated by a number of men. When she revisited the period of her abuse she did not believe she was returning to a time of innocence or even to a time of childhood:

> I was a woman in my granda's bed from three years old and I got swapped for being my stepfathers' mistress and my stepbrother's mistress and then the other rapes and abuse went on around it. (Jay)

Jay had not felt like a child when she was abused and found the idea of childhood innocence unhelpful, but it did nonetheless form the background against which she (and others) interpreted her childhood experiences. Her understanding of childhood and childhood sexual innocence contributed to Jay's inability to identify herself as a (sexually innocent) child.

Not only had Jay exercised a degree of agency, but she was also both sexually knowledgeable and sexually active, albeit not through choice, and this prevented her from seeing her experiences as (child) sexual abuse:

> I didn't feel I was a child and I think that's part of why I couldn't accept it as abuse. (Jay)

Jay was a sexually knowing child from a young age and this *knowing* challenged or disrupted the artificial boundaries between childhood (sexual) innocence and (sexually) knowledgeable adulthood. She no longer had 'sexual innocence' - the key attribute of childhood that needed protecting. Jay could therefore be seen (by some) as no longer in danger because her innocence no longer needed protecting and so sex with Jay, like with other sexually knowledgeable young women, could be seen (by some) as not harmful because her innocence was not harmed. Furthermore, because harm has become linked to wrongfulness, the lack of harm (including to Jay's innocence) could therefore also lead to her treatment being seen (by some) as not wrong and not abuse. Jay was not the only one who failed to see her experiences of childhood sex as abusive and it may be that her removal from a state of sexual innocence, and therefore childhood, contributed to that failure by others and contributed to her being subjected to other forms of abuse, including additional sexual abuse by both strangers and adults she knew. As she says of this later abuse:

> *It wasn't until then that I twigged that everybody knew about it and I'd been keeping this secret and it wasn't any secret, because everybody knew and that's when I started becoming angry. Because trying to keep a secret it led to other abuse.* (Jay)

Jay's sexual knowledge also served to construct her as potentially corrupting both to other children and, like Lolita, to adult men. If Jay (or other young women) is seen as the corrupting influence, she can also be seen as being to blame for her own abuse, thereby removing her abusers from responsibility and blame. We see this in the story told by Jay, but we can also see it in the story of one of the young women in *Three Girls* whose story of abuse was not listened to and whose abusers were ultimately not charged with abusing her (although they were charged with abusing other young girls).

Jay – Agency and choice

Current orthodoxy on child abuse constructs sexual abuse as the most damaging (Hacking 1991, 1995) but as Jay's account shows - it is not always sexual abuse, or the sexual acts of an abusive childhood that is experienced as most damaging or difficult to deal with by children and young people themselves:

> *I found I couldn't take the psychological abuse at all no. I could cope better with the physical and sexual abuse than I could the psychological. (Jay)*

Jay found the psychological abuse so much harder to deal with that she 'chose' to return to the house where she believed she would probably be sexually abused.

> *That's why I walked out of hers' [step fathers' mistress] and straight back into the abuse, knowing it would be the same, hoping it wouldn't be but knowing it would be.* (Jay)

Whilst it is important to recognise that Jay found the psychological abuse harder to deal with than the sexual abuse, it is perhaps more important to acknowledge the degree of agency or choice that Jay exercised within her abusive childhood. Within our contemporary understanding of CSA, which constructs victims as sexually innocent but also passive and lacking agency, Jay's 'choice' to return to her abusers house can be, and indeed has been, used to blame her for the abuse perpetrated against her. Jay was a child, but she was not passive and this helped to remove her (further) from the state of childhood. It also further removed her from the dominant CSA story. Jay was clear that her decision to go back to the house where she would be forced to have sex was based on an assessment of her situation in which she chose the childhood that she felt best able to cope with. She did not choose to be sexually abused, any more than those young women in Rochdale who featured in *Three Girls* and other towns and cities chose to be sexually abused when they chose, for example, to go to the local take-away and / or accept alcohol and drugs.

Taking a risk / telling a different story

Jay had, throughout her childhood and early adulthood, been silenced and left without a story (of sexual abuse) to tell. However, from the vantage point of the present and with a new narrative framework that rejected the contemporary harm story, Jay was able to challenge this view of her

childhood experiences. She came to recognise that she had been sexually abused as a child, by numerous men. However, she also recognised that there were times when she played an active part in those 'sexual relationships'. This was not because she was responsible or to blame or enjoyed being abused or enjoyed having sex with men. It was because, as a child, Jay did what was in her power to do to mediate (the effects of) all her childhood experiences, not just those that were sexually abusive. There is a courage exhibited in Jay's telling of her story but not simply because she told of surviving an extremely abusive childhood but because in telling her particular (agentic) story she risked (and still risks) being blamed for the abuse perpetrated against her. However, it is a risk she should not have (had) to take. It was also a risk taken by the victims who featured in *Three Girls* and whilst for two of those girls their abuse was recognised by the CPS, one was left blamed not only for her own abuse but for a part she was said to have played in the abuse of other girls.

Conclusion

In the HM Government report Tackling Child Sexual Exploitation (2015) the authors stated that:

> We need a fundamental change of attitude within professions and the public about the nature of this crime... And professionals and the public must become more aware of the signs of abuse (HM Government 2015: p 6).

Whilst I would not disagree with this statement I would go further and suggest what we need is a new sexual abuse narrative – one which does not assume all young people are sexually innocent and which recognises that, irrespective of the choices young people make and the harm that might or might not result, sexual abuse is always wrong. Central to this new narrative is the need to separate sexual innocence from childhood, to separate harm from wrongfulness and to separate agency and choice from blame. Children and young people in the middle of such abusive experiences are still confronted with 'the harm story' of CSA which constructs children as sexually innocent and victims as passive and lacking agency. Therefore if children and young people are seen as sexually knowledgeable and/or sexually active they risk being removed from the categories of 'child' because they are no longer innocent, and from the category of 'victim' because their innocence is no longer in danger. Equally, if they also exercise a degree of agency either in an attempt to mediate the experience, or because they are not passive and do not lack agency, they risk being removed from the categories of 'child' and/or 'victim'. They also risk having their experiences, or at least the abusive element of those experiences, dismissed and blamed for the abuse perpetrated against them. We can see this clearly in the story told by Jay, but we can also see it in the experiences of those young women in Rochdale (and other towns in the UK) whose sexual abuse by groups of men was not recognised as such, and who were therefore left unprotected for many years. We owe it to Jay, to the young women in *Three Girls,* and to all the other victims whose stories have not (yet) been heard to challenge this singular dominant story of CSA and the assumptions of innocence and victims' lack of agency that underpin it. In order to do so we need to educate all those professionals who work with children and young people, including teachers and other education professionals, so that they can respond appropriately to all victims, not just those who conform to a particular ideal.

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